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Spiritual Magnetism and Religious Sites: The Taizé Community as an Attraction

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Abstract

In a world where conflicting spiritual interests and affiliation are becoming increasingly common, the village of Taizé aims to act as a vessel of transformative experiences that address the collective fragmentation of their pilgrim visitors. This dissertation argues that the certain experiences pilgrims encounter during a week-long stay in Taizé function as attractors of the notion of spiritual magnetism (Preston 1992). As attractors, these experiences are not only intimately transformative in practice but also resonate with therapeutic potential while still adhering to a set of locally particular values. More specifically, it can be seen that, while accounting for the differences in religious affiliation and identities of the pilgrims, prayer, silence, and practical work produce a powerfully compelling rhythmicity for the pilgrims in Taizé.

An Excerpt on Silence

There also exists the option for pilgrims and volunteers to enter into a week of silence at Le Puits, one of the houses of silence in the village. Le Puit is a house that is mildly disorienting in design and large enough to accommodate for over thirty visitors. The rooms are sparsely furnished, the corridors are narrowly built, and the flowers outside the house are diligently maintained. There is no living room in the house, and the kitchen is without a stove. For the housekeeper, a personal room is built next to the main entrance as a miniature sanctum accessible to those with inquiries or complaints at all hours of the day.

Those who are committed to a week in silence have markedly different schedules to those who do not. For one, there are no practical work assignments, even for the volunteers who join in with the weekly visitors. For another, those in silence eat with their housemates at a set schedule, rather than joining the food distribution areas at one's leisure. Those in silence also benefit from temporarily assigned contact brothers from the Community as conversational partners and confidants for the week. Rather than walking around the village and making new acquaintances, those in silence are recommended to partake in daily walks outside of the village and spend their time in meditative reflection.

Whilst performing my duties as a housekeeper of Le Puits, it became apparent that the village's specific form of silence was something rather difficult for several week-long pilgrims. More than a few pilgrims knocked on my door in the early days of the week, miming their questions when I appeared to face them. One had asked if he was permitted to read books, and another quit his lodgings after three days. What many pilgrims had missed when entering into silence was quite simple. Entering into silence was not an excuse for skipping practical work, but an opportunity to take time out to "quieten conflicting voices and master obsessive anxiety..." (Brother Roger 2012: 47). They were permitted to speak or read if necessary while keeping in mind that the point of silence was to reduce the majority of input from a person's daily life to a minimum. Indeed, the time and effort spent on pretending to be a mute mime was anything but "conducive to the true spirit of inner silence" (*ibid.*: 51). More than being alone in one's thoughts, being in silence was an experience in sensitizing individuals, be it to a divine agent or to their mental states.

References

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- Preston, J. 1992. "Spiritual Magnetism: An Organizing Principle for the Study of Pilgrimage," in: A. Morinis (ed.) *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 31-46.